"Using Quality Initiatives in Online Curriculum"

Rebecca Lawson, Professor, Lansing Community College

Abstract

Recently my institution began a study on student retention and success rates. The initial phase looked at the impact of student computer skill levels and whether that had an impact on retention and success rates in the online environment. While the study showed there was a need for some skill remediation among certain populations, the study also pointed to additional factors that needed to be addressed in order to increase these rates. The current phase of the study is the development of an institutional plan for the implementation of a quality assurance and continuous improvement program for use in our online curriculum. The plan includes a course review process focused on improving the instructional design strategies for both online and hybrid courses. The results of the course review process are expected to yield improved organization of course content along with closer alignment of course assessments with course objectives. It is expected that the quality assurance program will improve retention rates, build student success indicators, and strengthen our accreditation package.

Background

Lansing Community College (LCC) can be considered a leader in online education. LCC offered its first online course in 1997. LCC was the first community college in the state of Michigan to offer a totally online degree. Currently, the college offers seven online Associate degree programs, eight online certificate programs, and forty-nine online transfer programs.

LCC serves approximately 40,000 students annually. Fifteen percent of the total enrollment is in our online curriculum. Many of the students are from our neighboring six-county district. However, we join with twenty-five other community colleges as part of the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative so we serve students anywhere in the state. In addition, we are a provider for both the "eArmy U" program and the "GoArmyEd" program. Nearly every course offered contains at least one student who is learning from some location outside of Michigan.

Rationale

With millions of students enrolling in online courses and considering it as their long-term strategy for post-secondary education, it is critical that institutions provide quality online programs. The exponential growth of online learning is not sustainable without support. The rising enrollments underscore the need for institutions to implement strategic plans to support their online curriculum.

The national trend is to develop a set of "best practices" by applying peer-based quality assurance programs during the development of online curriculum. In the short-term, these efforts potentially

improve issues of retention and student success while enhancing the learning process in the online programs. The long-term outcome should be the preservation of online enrollment rates and sustainability of program growth.

There are factors creating challenges for the development of strategic online programs. These challenges include:
- Meeting the needs of online students
- Keeping up with the technologies available for online instruction
- Offering an appropriate level of support and compensation to attract high-quality faculty

In addition, other factors affect the quality of online curriculum. Among these factors are the faculty member's training and readiness for online teaching, the students' role with respect to engagement and readiness for an online course, instructional design, the course content, the course management system and use of its features, the institutional infrastructure, and the availability of student support services.

Implementation And Assessment Strategies

Choosing A Program Model

There are two main schools of thought regarding quality assurance programs: best practices vs. outcomes assessment. A best practices approach follows a very clear set of guidelines for course development and administration. Typically, a rubric is used to evaluate categories such as content and objectives, instructional design, student assessment, the technology used, course evaluation, and course management.

On the other hand, quality assurance programs based on outcomes assessment shift the focus from the institution to the learners. This approach focuses on learner performance. The institution makes sure that by the end of the course, learners are able to demonstrate skills, content knowledge, and critical thinking skills in measurable ways.

LCC will follow a best practices approach. Each new course will be developed (or re-developed as changes to existing courses become necessary) to adhere to the following principles:
- Present course content clearly
- Organize and clearly present all required work, quizzes, and assessments to be used
- Reinforce learning styles by providing supplemental content
- Offer varied content such as readings, presentations, audio, and video to engage all students
- Set up discussion boards and small group projects to motivate collaboration
- Provide access to library and other support services
- Provide both learner and faculty support

Assessing The Quality Assurance Program's Success

Quality can be assessed by student achievement and student satisfaction. Online education can be as effective as traditional classroom instruction in student achievement levels. Students can be equally satisfied with online instruction. The learning environment should support and encourage inquiry, critical thinking, and reflection. In a recent survey, 23-45% of online faculty used online activities related to critical thinking such as hands-on performance, interactive labs, data analysis, and simulation. It is hoped that the quality assurance program will help improve this statistic at LCC.

After the project implementation, LCC will conduct several surveys of our online students and our faculty to determine how well each group's needs were met. LCC wants to make sure the findings of our previous study were correct; i.e. students seem to have enough skills to perform appropriately and successfully in the online learning environment. We also need to verify that the resources, curriculum structure, and the design of the course were sufficient for their learning.

The student surveys will explore the following criteria:
- Student expectations and needs related to online learning
- Student receptiveness to pedagogy innovations
- Student receptiveness to types of technology being used

There will likely be changes in the roles of online faculty. The surveys will help us to discover whether faculty feel they have enough institutional support to be successful. As a final inquiry we will seek input on the level of collaborative learning within each course and whether the faculty (and students) feels this is an appropriate level.

Conclusion

Although the quality assurance program is still in its beginning stages, LCC has the commitment and the drive to take its online curriculum to the next level. The college motto is "Where Success Begins." LCC is taking steps to help its students succeed not only in traditional learning environments but also in the online environment. This is a long-term commitment to its stakeholders (students, faculty, administration, and the community). LCC is committed to maintaining its reputation as a leader in online education. It is the expectation that the quality assurance program will help LCC maintain that status.